

THE OTTER, THE FISHERMAN'S ALLY.

THIS carnivorous quadruped conforms to the habits of his order by asking of the earth a place of shelter, but his sphere of action lies in the waters. The sea-otter is practically amphibious, and touches the seal in the transition between quadrupeds and the mammifers of the ocean.

No animal series is complete without affiliation with neighboring series. While the carnivorous quadrupeds invade, by the bat tribes, the domain of air, they plunge into the waters by amphibia. The otter, like the seal, is piscivorous, naturally preferring the flesh of pike or carp to that of rabbit or lamb. It has affinities of character with the water-spaniel by its extreme docility, its playful affection, and in being an auxiliary of the sportsman, when the latter is intelligent enough to behold in it something more than a troublesome rival or even than a precious fur. The series of carnivorous hunters, in harmony with Nature's order, casts this genus into the domain of the waters where it works in fellowship with the cormorant, to the profit and pleasure of the Chinese fisherman. So in another sphere the falcon completes the pleasures of the chase, which it shares with the dog, the horse, and man. These social characteristics are far more important to be known and felt than are the anatomical points to be learned by dissecting the dead body of a beast. To the former, accordingly, we invite our readers' attention under the guidance of M. A. Toussenel, the great hunter-naturalist of our epoch. "I am disposed," says he, "to great indulgence toward my civilized fellow-creatures, because they are victims of their own ignorance in many things, but what I can hardly understand is their stupid indifference with regard to the otter. This animal was destined to hunt the waters and share the piscatory spoil with man, not to be itself hunted; and it should therefore rank among the beasts to be preserved. Men complain of the deficiency of fishing-dogs: the otter was given to console them; yet, instead of making this good-natured beast their ally in the chase of fish, they make an enemy of it—they set a price upon its skin."

Take a young otter from its mother's breast, be amiable with it, caress it as you pet your puppies, and it will soon come to cherish the same attachment for you as your spaniel; it will follow you everywhere, will grieve for your absence, will salute your return with little stampings of joy, and, when you have indoctrinated it with your opinions on the superiority of butcher's meat over fish, it will be converted to that faith. Request it then to seek for you in a neighboring river or pond a respectable fish, it will plunge headforemost and presently bring it to your feet. Take care, however, on such occasions, to influence its morals by a slice of beef or mutton, which it will not be indelicate to present to it in exchange for its booty. At Verdun-sur-Meuse, not long since, I saw an otter thus trained, who was the delight of his master and the admiration of all amateurs. The history of unfortunate Poland records the glory and the fate of an otter, the pet of King Casimir, whose wonderful craft long excited the envy of all the water-spaniels at court. A soldier, on guard at the palace, assassinated it one day, to make a muff of its skin for his sweetheart. Its royal master wept for it. The Swedish nobles also are recorded to have kept otters in their service, which would go, at a signal from the cook, catch fish, and bring it into the kitchen to be dressed for dinner. Audubon and Bachman say, that "young otters, raised by one

of them, became, in two or three days, as gentle as the pups of the domestic dog. They preferred milk and mush to either fish or meat of any kind, until they were several months old. On entering our study they would crawl into our lap, mount upon our table, and romp among our books and papers, often upsetting the inkstand."

The Chinese, whom we treat like a community of maggots, and who retort upon Europe the stigma of barbarism, are far more advanced than ourselves in the art of making use of beasts, and have for centuries completely domesticated the otter. These creatures are trained to fish in company, to attack, to pursue, to snap up and to deliver their game. This is a much more animated sport than line-fishing, and we may ask in behalf of the Chinese, however inferior to us in the arts of bombarding unresisting cities, and of poisoning foreign nations by compulsory commerce with narcotic drugs, whether the art of instructing intelligent beasts is not a higher and a better occupation.

The remarkable examples which the otter has given of his intelligence and docility whenever a fair trial has been made of these qualities, have not yet succeeded in opening the eyes of our poor fishermen, and they have declared upon him a war of extermination, instead of seeking to make use of his superior aptitudes. Then the otter, exasperated and forced to make reprisals, takes most lively pleasure in depopulating the ponds and streams. Some of them have been known, as if with the desire of raising the jealous fury of the fisherman to a white heat, to amuse themselves with strewing every night his favorite haunts with the bones of immense carps and other fishes.

One of the poacher's keenest enjoyments is to poach under the beard of the police and the public order, when he is protected against them by any barrier, a river for example. The otter, which has often chanced to witness this manœuvre, delights to imitate it. As it knows very nearly the range of a shot-gun, it likes to amuse itself by sitting on the bank at a respectable distance from the marksman. It breakfasts familiarly before him, rolls on the sand, and gambols provokingly. Some pretend to go to sleep at the noise of the firing.

There are otters also who have sworn eternal hatred to civilized institutions, and have decreed the penalty of death against any one amongst them who should betray the right of free fishery, by entering the service of man. And the tamed otters know so well the fate that awaits them in the society of their brothers and sisters of the Wilde, that you cannot make them put one paw before the other on days when they have wind, by sight, scent, or hearing, of a free member of their family.

The otter-chase is really an ambush; dogs, however, some-

times hunt it. It is also taken, without much trouble, in snares. It gives birth to five or six young in the spring, the little ones repairing to the water like young ducks, as soon as they have strength to walk. It earths itself under shaded banks, under rocks, or the roots of old trees. Audubon has found otters nestled in the hollow of a tree, on a bed of water-grasses, strings of inner bark, and other soft substances. The hole leading up into their nests is always burrowed under water. The otter plunges into snow as into water, when dogs pursue it, and when the river, its natural refuge, is frozen by a hard winter. Its rapid succession of sudden appearances and disappearances is certainly the most curious of all the manœuvres of the chase that I have ever witnessed. The favorite sport

of the otter, says Mr. Godman, is sliding. For this purpose, in winter, the highest ridge of snow is selected, to the top of which the otter scrambles, where, lying on the belly with the fore-feet bent backward, they give themselves an impulse with their hind-legs and swiftly glide head foremost down the slope, sometimes for twenty yards. This sport they continue apparently with the keenest enjoyment, until fatigue or hunger induces them to desist. Cartright, Hearne, Richardson, and Audubon confirm this observation.

Travellers, who have fished in China, relate having seen good otters, well trained, sold frequently at the price of four hundred dollars. Why have our fishermen and poachers never conceived the idea of establishing a primary school for the education of otters, as one has been started in the Pyrenees for the bears?

The statistics of the French otter-hunting show that an average of four thousand otters are annually destroyed in France. But this destruction is chiefly effected by snares

and ambushes, together with the help of the dog, which is thus *particeps criminis*.

All treatises on hunting, in French, English, Spanish, German, etc., expatiate in detail on the chase of the otter with dogs. It is hard, at first, to understand how a beast that does not leave the water can be hunted by dogs that do not leave the land, but this is better seen on the field of manœuvres. The otter must come often to the surface, and is pursued along small water-courses where the dogs can keep the banks. In Lorraine I have seen poor devils of otter-hunters travel twenty-four miles in chase of the same animal, and miss him at last or be overtaken by night. They caught, I'll warrant, more rheumatisms and pleurisies than bank-notes. At least three are needed for this villany—two men and one dog. The men are armed with long lances to thrust into every hole, while the successful dog requires uncommon courage, scent, and perseverance; and, as servants of this merit are not sold by the gross, it results that the true otter-chase has but few amateurs.



The American otter (*Lutra Canadensis*) inhabits our whole range of fresh waters, but is more frequently met between Chesapeake Bay and the Mexican Gulf. Audubon finds but one species, varying, with the climate, in its fur like the raccoon, the mink, or the rabbit. The sea-otter is nearly twice as big as his fresh-water consin, and has the finest fur. It inhabits isles and deltas of the North Pacific coast of both continents, and used to abound near San Francisco.



J. W. Audubon saw one in the San Joaquin River, where the bulrushes grew thickly. It suddenly emerged upon a drift-log, a hundred yards above the party. On being shot at, it slid into the water and sank without a ripple, but after a minute raised its head and then began diving as after fish. It seemed as much at ease in the water as a grebe, and remained under the surface as long as a loon. After a second shot it appeared frightened, swam rapidly to the opposite shore, and disappeared in the rushes. "It seems," says Sir John Richardson, "to have more the manners of the seal than of the land-otter. It frequents rocks washed by the sea, resides mostly in the water, and is often seen very remote from the shore."